Cable Industry Quietly Shelves Its Bogus Plan To Make Cable Boxes Cheaper, More Competitive

Last year, the cable industry quietly launched one of the most misleading and successful lobbying efforts in the industry's history. The target? A plan concocted by the former FCC that would have let customers watch cable programming without having to rent a cable box or use a CableCARD. Given the industry makes $21 million annually in rental fees off of this entrenched hardware monopoly, the industry got right to work with an absolute wave of disinformation, claiming that the FCC's plan would confuse customers, increase piracy, and was (with a little help from Jesse Jackson) somehow even racist (seriously).

At one point, the industry even managed to grab the help of the US Copyright Office, which falsely claimed that more cable box competition would somehow violate copyright. Of course the plan had nothing to do with copyright, and everything to do with control, exemplifying once again that for the US Copyright Office, public welfare is often a distant afterthought.

As part of this stage show, the cable industry also created a group specifically tasked with attacking the proposal. Dubbed the Future of TV Coalition, the group set forth to not only attack the FCC's plan, but to propose its own counter proposal it claimed made any cable box reform efforts at the FCC unnecessary. Dubbed the "ditch the box" proposal, the cable industry and the Future of TV Coalition breathlessly stated the industry (pdf) was already cooking up ways to help consumers avoid rental fees have greater choice, and that these efforts were already well underway:

> *"This new "Ditch the Box" approach calls for binding, enforceable obligations for major TV providers to allow customers to ditch their set-top boxes and access live and on demand programming via boxless apps compatible with a wide range of retail devices, including smart TVs, game consoles, streaming devices, laptops, tablets, phones, and more...Providers will have two years to fully implement the new requirements – and many are already racing to do so sooner."*

That was then, this is now. Shortly after Trump's election win, the new Ajit Pai led FCC quickly moved to scuttle the plan. And not too surprisingly, the cable industry's counter plan to make lives better for consumers never actually materialized, and appears to have been mothballed:

> *"The Future of TV Coalition has gone silent — it last tweeted Nov. 28 — the cable industry's trade group NCTA hasn't had much to say about it either. NCTA spokesman Brian Dietz wrote in an e-mail that Ditch the Box was pitched as "an "alternative" to the Wheeler's original proposal. Without the FCC's acceptance of Ditch the Box, that plan got ditched."*

So without somebody actively pressuring an uncompetitive sector to stop being uncompetitive, they continue to be uncompetitive. Who could have possibly predicted that? Of course the cable industry continues to pay empty lip service to the idea of choice and freedom, all the while continuing efforts to make actual consumer choice on this front as difficult and expensive as ever (see Comcast's decision to charge users a completely unnecessary fee just to use a Roku as a cable box, or cross-industry efforts to use unnecessary broadband usage caps and overage fees to drive up the cost of streaming via their competitors).

The cable industry falsely believes this is all an ingenious plan to keep its traditional cable TV cash cow alive indefinitely. But as the continued and accelerating rate of TV cord cutting illustrates, the cable sector isn't going to be nearly as impervious to market evolution as it likes to believe.